



MTA's Fare Hikes and Service Cuts

From coast to coast, mass transit is under attack. Decreased ridership due to the economy and reduced state subsidies are leading to cuts in service and fare increases.

For us in Connecticut, New York's MTA and its \$800 million budget shortfall could affect our daily commute. The NY transit agency is holding public hearings on plans to cut bus and subway service, eliminate student discount fares and, yes, even target Metro-North service.

Starting this June, the MTA wants to shorten Metro-North trains (achieving a \$2.8 million annual savings) and eliminate others (a \$1.6 million savings). Targeted for cuts in Connecticut are two mid-day trains between Grand Central and New Haven, and a late night local from GCT to Stamford.

But neither of these cuts will happen, thanks to our Governor.

First, many New Haven line trains are already standing room only so it would be impossible to reduce their length. Some 6 – 7% of our trains don't have enough cars to handle the passenger load, let alone see the number of cars get reduced.

Second, under our operating contract with Metro-North, none of these service reductions can be unilaterally dictated by MTA without agreement by the state of Connecticut. And Governor Rell has said "no way" to any service cuts in Connecticut.

Having for years sought a voting seat on the MTA or Metro-North board and been ignored, Governor Rell is quite correct in reminding those NY agencies that their current economic problems are of their creation, not Connecticut's. Decades of over-zealous bonding for massive projects like East Side Access (a \$7 billion project to bring LIRR trains into Grand Central) have left a pit of pain which New Yorkers dug, but have the chutzpah to now ask our state's riders to fill. No way, MTA!

As I reminded the MTA Board when I testified at a recent public hearing... "Metro-North is a vendor to the state of Connecticut. We hire you to operate our trains. But we are not equal partners in the operation of this railroad."

Governor Rell has told CDOT Commissioner Joseph Marie to block those proposed service cuts, and the dutiful transportation czar is following orders, much to the chagrin of Metro-North which, doubtless, will get their revenge at a later date.

If cuts in Metro-North service are needed, let them be in NY State, not Connecticut. New York already has more trains and lower fares than we do, so they can bear a loss of service with less pain.

While there are two trains operating each hour between Stamford and Grand Central, we have only one train an hour between New Haven and GCT. So, let them cut the Westchester trains, not Connecticut's.

The final piece of good news is that we will not be looking at any fare increase here in Connecticut for the foreseeable future. A rumored 10% fare hike last fall to balance the state's budget was postponed and a planned 1.25% fare hike January 1st 2010 (to help pay for the new M8 rail cars) was delayed, keeping the Governor's promise of no fare hike until the (now delayed) rail cars go into service.

Our neighboring states have entered a death spiral of less mass transit at higher costs, discouraging ridership even further and eventually forcing more service cuts or fare hikes. But here in Connecticut, for a change, we remain a leader in maintaining fast, on-time Metro-North rail service with no price increase.

And the credit all goes to our governor, Jodi Rell, for holding firm against the MTA.



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Progress on Train Station Parking

Finally some good news: we're making a little progress on getting more parking at our rail stations. The CDOT Rail Station Parking Taskforce, created with great fanfare by Governor Rell in February, is starting to reach consensus on some solutions to our parking problems. An interim report is due this month, but it looks like the group will continue its mission of increasing access to our trains into the new year.

Given this year's five percent decline in rail ridership caused by the recession, it hasn't been too bad when it came to finding parking or seats on the train. But with the new M8 cars due to come online in 2010 (admittedly, a year behind schedule), now's the time to plan for an expected increase in rail ridership. Heck, that's something we should have done a decade back.

The recession also seems to be squeezing out some parking permit "hoarders"... the folks who waited years for their permits, don't use them often but don't want to give them up. This year, a lot of those hoarders took a pass on renewals. And that means new permits can be issued and some names can come off the waiting lists.

Towns have also done a better job of "scrubbing" those lists, removing the names of the dead, those who've moved away or got permits elsewhere.

One experiment that didn't work was Darien's plan to offer discounted parking permits for more distant lots. Priced at \$200 vs. the usual \$315, almost nobody was interested. But that's Darien.

Other ideas to increase parking that came from the Taskforce include...

1. Building decked parking structures at some stations. Of course, there's no money and dubious interest from the towns.
2. Offering a centralized website showing real waiting list times in each community.
3. Developing a legal secondary market for parking permit "rentals" or sell-backs to issuing towns.
4. More bike and moped racks at all stations.
5. Offering incentives for car-poolers: better spaces, lower rates.

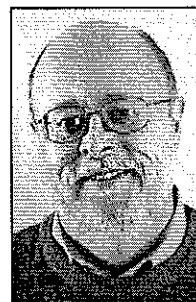
6. Improving pedestrian access to stations, such as side-walks.
7. Offering a "guaranteed ride home" from stations for those dropped off.
8. Providing ZipCars (hourly car rentals) at key stations.
9. Improving security in station parking lots.
10. Providing van-pools from stations to key employers.

Meantime in Stamford, the gridlock continues. Plans to replace the existing station garage have not moved forward, despite a waiting list of hundreds of would-be parkers.

CDOT's initial attempts to find a private developer who would turn the garage into an office building / condo palace turned up little interest. So now the agency is pumping money into temporary repairs to the crumbling structure.

The city of Stamford would have some say over use of the parking garage site for anything other than just parking, so they commissioned their own study of the station and surrounding roads. Of course, their recommendations don't have to be followed by CDOT, which owns the garage and the station and didn't even participate in the consultant's work.

Private developers seem ready to build parking within walking distance of the Stamford station, but at what cost to users? It already costs \$70 per month to park at the state-owned lot adjacent to the station, so what might the market rate for parking be at a private lot? And will commuters really want to walk several blocks to the station having been spoiled for decades with a state-owned lot with a sheltered walkway right into the waiting room?



JIM CAMERON has been a Darien resident for 18 years. He is Chairman of the Metro-North Commuter Council, a member of the Coastal Corridor TIA and the Darien RTM, but the opinions expressed here are his alone. Reach Jim Cameron at jim@camcomm.com or www.trainweb.org/ct



Metro-North's New M8 Rail Cars

I have seen the future and it is cool... very cool.

Metro-North has finally unveiled a full scale, un-powered mock-up of the new M8 rail car it designed and Kawasaki is building for Connecticut commuters. All I can say is "Wow!"

Much of the credit goes to renowned designer Cesar Vergara, who has commuted for years from Connecticut and spent many months riding the Harlem and Hudson line cars to learn from their successes and mistakes.

From the outside, our new cars will look much like those M7 cars running in Westchester and on the LIRR. But on the inside, it's all first class... though it's still two and three seating. The color scheme is deep burgundy and rich cream with frosted silver and aluminum.

The windows are bigger. The overhead baggage rack has a soft, scalloped look. The lights run the length of the car and are offset by oval accents in the vestibules. The floors are a non-skid rubber made in Germany.

There are single leaf doors instead of doubles. An overhead LED displays the next stop, complemented by an automated PA system. The crew can talk to each other on their own intercom and there's a separate intercom for emergency use by passengers to contact a conductor.

Yes, the seats are still two on one side and three on the other, but they look much more comfortable. Covered with artificial leather, each seat has its own headrest with airline style winglets to stop snoozers' heads from landing on a neighbor's shoulder. Between the headrests are grab bars to assist getting in and out. And wonder of wonders, the seats have an extra inch of "pitch", or distance from the back of the seat to the next one. They will be soft, but not bucket-style as we now have. And each window seat will have a power plug for laptops.

The new M8's will have vacuum toilets capable of holding five days of effluent, though pump-outs are promised more often... e.g., they shouldn't stink.

And thanks to ADA requirements, they'll be roomy too!

Each train set will be equipped with GPS so it will always know where it is, as will the railroad's control room. Space is being designed for the addition of WiFi gear, but none is installed for now, pending a study with Amtrak.

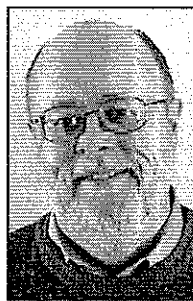
Despite earlier plans to have cars share power conversion duties (with one car being powered by third rail and its mate fed by overhead catenary), all cars will now have both third rail and pantographs, but be permanently coupled in "married pairs".

AC traction motors will offer speedy acceleration and convert braking energy into generation of electricity to be fed back into the overhead wires. Because the new cars are heavier and there will be so many of them (300+), Metro-North and CDOT are worried about whether the existing power infrastructure can handle the load. (When the M7's were first added to the Harlem division major upgrades to the power grid were needed).

The first eight cars will now arrive in the fall of 2009 for testing and acceptance by the end of that year. They're being manufactured by Kawasaki in, of all places, Lincoln, Nebraska. Despite fears to the contrary, CDOT promises that the M8 maintenance facility will be finished by the time the first cars arrive.

So, for those of you who think I'm an old grouch with never a positive thing to say, read this column again. The new cars are coming and they're great!

(See images of M8 on page 2.)

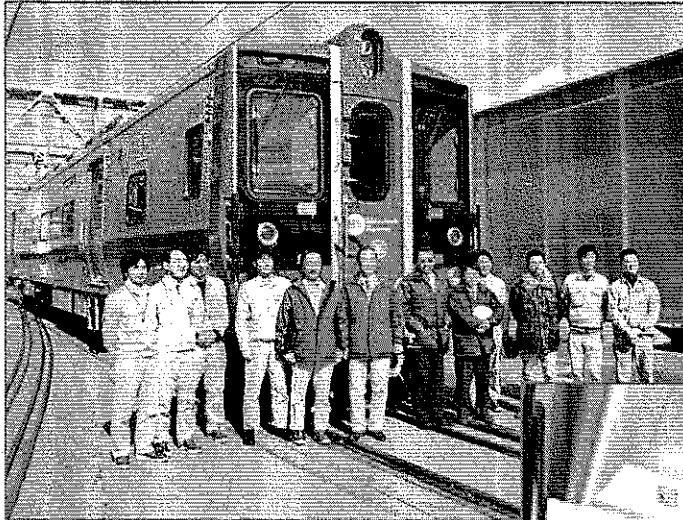


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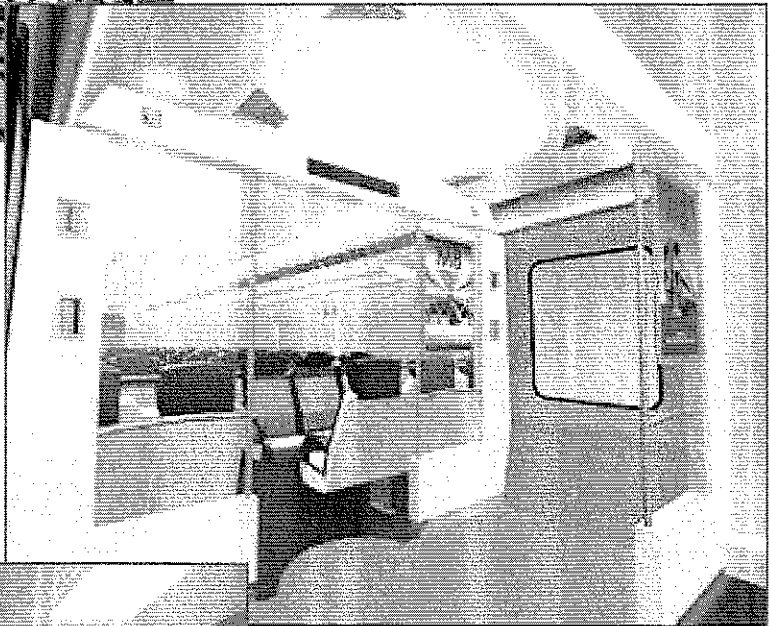


TALKING TRANSPORTATION

Metro-North's New M8 Rail Cars



First M8 car, fresh from the Kawaasaki plant in Japan



Rendering of vestibule



Rendering of interior seating